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Covert actions in full view

Apparently the United States has reached the point when it can't run a covert CIA operation against the likes of the Libyan leader Col. Moammar Khadafy without someone running to a reporter to blow the whistle.

Last weekend the Washington Post published a story about the operation, which had been disclosed to leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who had some questions about the plan.

It might have been worse, of course. The news might have been that the CIA wasn't doing anything to make trouble for Col. Khadafy, who is one of the most dangerous pirates on the international scene. That would have been one heck of a secret.

As it is, the episode lights up a real problem with the way these matters are handled in Washington. The procedure for planning and authorizing CIA covert actions repeatedly has broken down. In the most absurd instance, there were open debates in Congress about whether to authorize covert aid to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua. Pretty soon only nostalgia buffs will recall the days when covert still meant secret.

In this latest case, there cannot have been any fundamental controversy over whether it

is appropriate for the United States to do what it can to help Col. Khadafy's opponents. If ever covert action were justified, it is justified against Col. Khadafy. But apparently the leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee were unsure whether the plan entailed anything that could be thought to violate the law against U.S. participation in assassination plots. They wrote letters asking for clarification. Already the thing sounds less like a clandestine operation and more like a negotiation between lawyers over a land deed.

Finally, the information leaked. And the administration is vowing to take some kind of action.

It ought to. Along with Congress, it ought to reconsider the procedures for handling covert actions. It ought to ask whether the loop of people with access to the information is too large. It ought to consider whether legislators should be holding a lively correspondence with the White House over something that is supposed to be utterly secret. If it is important for the United States to be able to take secret steps to help friends and hobble foes—and this newspaper, along with the vast majority of Americans, thinks that it is—let's find a way to do it without making fools of ourselves.